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The Daily Telegram

News

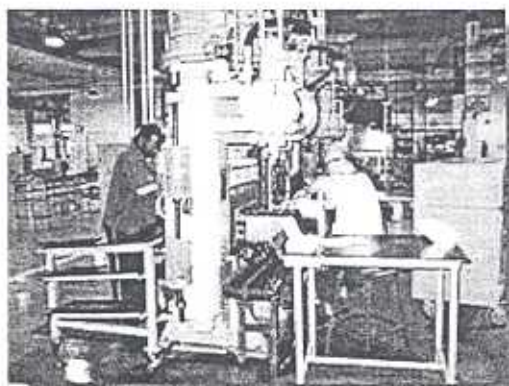
Prison work

Saturday, October 1, 2005 10:17 PM EDT

The Gus Harrison Correctional Facility 105 inmates are employed at a factory to produce license plates.

By Chris Gautz

Daily Telegram Staff Writer



Kenneth Anderson's hands are almost a blur as he deftly inserts clapper dies into the large hydraulic press. Inmates at the Gus Harrison factory make license plates. - Submitted photo

The continual thumping sound emanating from the press as it smashes down onto the thin aluminum doesn't faze him - he's been doing this for years.

At this factory, he has the most seniority and is the highest wage earner - by a mile - at \$1.06 an hour. The starting hourly pay is 35 cents.

That's because this 43,525-square-foot factory sits inside the 16-foot-high, double-chain-link, razor-wire-topped fences of the Gus Harrison Correctional Facility, located just outside Adrian's city limits.

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Market Watch			
NASDAQ	Oct-03-2005		
2162	10:57 am ET		
2162			
2141			
9am-11am 1pm-3pm 5pm			
Index	Last Trade	Change	
NASDAQ	2158.01	4.32	▲
SP 500	1226.73	-2.08	▲
Russ 2000	869.28	1.48	▲
AMEX	1736.70	-0.19	▲
NYSE	7620.21	-12.77	▲
30 YR BOND	48.19	0.51	▲
Oct 3, 2005 11:29 AM ET			
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Financial News			

And inside the Gus, it's some of the best work an inmate can come by.

The 105 inmates employed at the factory produce every license plate in the state of Michigan. This year they will make close to 2 million.

Will Rondeau, superintendent of the license plate factory, runs a tight - and very clean - ship, as evidenced by a tour of the facility he gave The Daily Telegram earlier this month.

"We try to keep the place as clean as possible," Rondeau said.

"Clean" is an understatement in a factory with spotless concrete floors, sealed and treated with so much varnishable wax the inmates can almost see their reflections looking up at them as they work.

"This is a facility that any administration would be proud of," warden Ken Romanowski said. "It's a highly efficient, highly secure prison operation."

By the numbers

Rondeau said he anticipates the factory will make about 1.8 million plates this year.

While it varies each day depending on demand, Rondeau said inmates make about 6,000 plates and 400 personalized plates each day.

Personalized plate requests are sent via computer each day from the secretary of state to the factory. Rondeau said individuals will generally receive them within two weeks of their orders.

The prisoners make about 250 different types of plates for Michigan residents.

Besides standard license plates, they also make license plates for vehicles on the Bay Mills Indian Reservation and for the carriages on Mackinac Island. And the small plates showing the capacity and weight limit of every elevator in the state are made at the factory.

The Michigan State University license plate is the highest-selling plate, Rondeau said. The second most purchased plate is the American flag plate.

In a written statement, Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land said she has been pleased with the partnership between her department and

those at the factory.

"The Department of Corrections has always been willing to make any changes that we requested," she said. "I'm also impressed with their use of technology and ability to produce license plates at the volumes necessary to serve our customers efficiently."

After the events of 9/11, Michigan was the first state to produce flag plates, Rondeau said. Soon after they began, the demand was so high - 2,000 a day - Rondeau said he had to buy another silk-screening machine to keep up.

Plates made at the factory were featured on national television when representatives from the Tim Allen sitcom "Home Improvement" asked to have several plates made. The plates read "2L TIME" because Allen's character on the show had a home improvement show called "Tool Time." The plates were placed on the cars in Allen's character's garage on the show.

The process

The Great Lakes Splendor plate, one of the most common other than the standard blue-and-white plate, goes through a long but quick process from a box to the back of a car.

When the large rolls of aluminum come into the factory from Jupiter Aluminum in Hammond, Ind., they are put into a decoiler machine to unwind them.

The unpainted aluminum then goes through a wash tank to remove any impurities and at the same time goes through a 150-degree water tank.

It is sent next through a straightener and then to a roll applicator, where a large roll of stickers with the bridge logo on it from 3M of St. Paul, Minn., adhere to the aluminum.

The plate is sent to a blanking press that puts the radius on all four corners and cuts the holes in the plates. The pieces from the holes in the plate are sucked into a vacuum, collected and recycled, which the factory receives a stipend for.

The hydraulic press is next, where numbers and letters are embossed onto the plate. The letters and numbers are each marked on clapper dies that have to be arranged for each particular plate.

Once the prisoner lines them up correctly, the press is engaged by pushing two buttons simultaneously with both thumbs - a safety mechanism to ensure no one can get their hand caught in the machine.

After the plate is pressed, inmates like Anderson move the next set of clapper dies into position, and move onto the next plate in a matter of seconds.

The embossed plates are then taken to the inking station, where the letters and numbers receive their color from an ink roll coating machine. The inked plates are moved into the drying oven, which is set at about 250 to 300 degrees, for 40 minutes.

Once dry, the plates are sent to the packaging department, checked for scratches and spelling errors, and then boxed and prepared for shipment.

The plates are shipped to individual secretary of state branch offices, which submit requests for specific quantities of a style and letter and number set.

The inmates

All the inmates who work in the factory are Level 1 prisoners from the adjoining Parr Highway Correctional Facility, where most are close to their release dates.

Anderson, who works on the hydraulic press, was convicted of three counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct and a felony firearms charge and is scheduled for release in the next five years.

Rondeau said he has never had a problem with the inmates while they work because it is such a coveted job, they know there is a waiting list with more than 50 names of prisoners waiting for a chance to work there.

"These are your best-performing inmates," Romanowski said. "They're the cream of the crop over there."

To work in the factory, Rondeau said each inmate has to fill out an application and interview for the position.

"We try to make this as close to the world as possible," he said.

The inmates also must have a high school diploma or GED to be considered for employment.

"We're here to train the inmates in a skill that they can take out on the real world," he said. "So hopefully they won't go back to prison."

Rondeau runs two shifts, five days a week at the plant, split between 105 inmates.

Starting pay is 35 cents an hour, and every six months the workers receive a penny raise. The average monthly pay is \$55 per prisoner.

The nonprofit factory

Rondeau said the idea of the factory is not to make a profit.

"Our idea is to break even," he said.

The factory is entirely self-sufficient, Rondeau said.

Raw materials, overhead and inmate labor are covered by what the factory charges the secretary of state for the plates.


Rondeau's salary, as well as those of his four supervisors, Jeff Lake, Pete Ballmann, Jerry Southwell and Les Janish, are also paid for by the sale of the plates.

"The taxpayers are not burdened by our salaries," he said.

To cut down on cost, many of the materials used in the production of the plates come from other Michigan State Industries factories in prisons across the state, Rondeau said.

The boxes used to ship the plates are made by prisoners in Jackson, and the pallets the boxes are shipped out on are made by prisoners in Iron River. Even the wax used to keep the shine on the floors is made by prisoners in Ypsilanti.

"We try to have as much done as we can in our own MSI factories," he said.

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The Daily Telegram

News

School fund-raising, plate by plate

Saturday, October 1, 2005 10:17 PM EDT

The license plates made at the Gus Harrison Correctional Facility are used by local schools to raise money.

By Chris Gautz

Daily Telegram Staff
Writer



MADISON TWP. - A new statewide program aimed at helping schools by way of an unusual fund-raising opportunity is slowly catching on, but it is already having an impact in Lenawee County.

The state's license plate factory, operated by the prisoners working in the Gus Harrison Correctional Facility, recently began making license plates for high school booster clubs.

The plates are a way to show off school spirit and raise money at the same time, Will Rondeau, superintendent of the license plate factory, said.

"Our goal is to help the schools out," Rondeau said. "It's a wonderful opportunity."

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Market Watch

NASDAQ Oct-02-2005
2162- 10:57 am ET

2152-
2141-
9am 1am 1pm 3pm 5pm

Index	Last Trade	Change
NASDAQ	2159.01	-4.32
S&P 500	1226.73	-2.08
Russ 2000	889.29	-1.48
AMEX	1738.70	-0.19
NYSE	7830.21	-12.77
30 YR BOND	46.19	-0.51

Oct 3, 2005 11:29 AM ET
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Financial News

Only 15 schools across the state have signed on to purchase the plates so far, but several booster clubs in the county have found them to be a great fund-raiser.

At Clinton High School, profits from the sale of the plates may help save the freshman basketball season, which was cut this summer due to budget constraints.

Parents at the school banded together to raise money to help the team and have almost reached their goal by utilizing the license plate program and traditional fund-raisers.

"Hopefully we can sell the remaining ones we have and bring the program back," Clinton High School Athletic Director Jim Pittman said.

Pittman, who has one of the plates on his car, as well as four more in his office, said sales are good.

"It seems to be going over real well," Pittman said, adding it helps there is a cause behind the purchase.

Rondeau said the plates, which are the same quality as the regulation license plates, are sold to the booster clubs for \$3.50 each, and schools have been selling them for \$10 to \$15.

"It's a win-win situation," Rondeau said.

So far, four Lenawee County schools have purchased the plates, including Hudson, which was the first school in the state to do so.

Hudson High School Athletic Director Tom Durbin said the school's booster club purchased them last fall.

"I've seen quite a few around," Durbin said. "The boosters have done a nice job of organizing that and getting it kicked off."

Durbin said he would recommend the fund-raiser to any school because it is also a great way to show school spirit.

"In that respect it's been pretty successful," he said.

Rondeau said Morenci and Sand Creek public schools have put in orders for the plates, and St. Joseph Academy is making plans to do so as well.

While the program is available to schools across the state, Rondeau said he would like to see Lenawee County schools have the first opportunity at them.

Rondeau said the factory can also make plates for nonprofit organizations, with a minimum order of 200 plates.

For more information about the plates, contact Rondeau at 263-3500, ext. 2630.



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